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ABSTRACT

This paper presents eight suggestions for improving the chances for success of collaborative writing projects among scholars. Based on personal experience and semi-structured interviews with colleagues, eight "clues" for collaboration were identified: (1) a written pre-collaborative agreement; (2) an unambiguous work plan; (3) equal motivation on the part of collaborators; (4) the need for a partnership to have more going for it than collective need; (5) the need for collaborators to quarrel and discuss conflicts; (6) a critical reader to offer suggestions; (7) the need for close personal contact to prevent procrastination; and (8) the possibility of writing collaboratively with a spouse or significant other. (MDM)

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Collaborative Writing,

or,

Is Half a Loaf Worth the Stomach Ache?

by

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Running head: COLLABORATIVE WRITING

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Abstract

Most advice on professional or scholarly writing stresses the importance of collaboration. Based on "semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a nonrandom sample" as well as personal experience, the author suggests eight clues for collaboration that will make coauthoring more likely to succeed. This manuscript has been slightly revised from the version that was published in *Unabashed Librarian*, #102 (1997), pages 15-17.

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Introduction

Most guides to professional writing, nearly every workshop on publishing vs. perishing, stresses the importance of collaboration. Glowing promises of success accompany this advice: You can double your output; work will proceed faster; you can combine your expertise with that of another; you'll have a built-in editor; someone will care as passionately about the project as you do and will tolerate, nay encourage, tedious conversations about statistical significance that might swamp your more everyday relationships.[1] Problems are glossed over with "Can-This-Marriage-Be-Saved" advice to "discuss responsibilities and expectations in advance." The following will serve as a cautionary tale and some revisionist wisdom about authorial collaboration. Identifying details have been altered--slightly--to protect the guilty.

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[1]Benjaminson, "Collaboration: Do You Want to Do It Alone, or With Someone Else?" In: *Publish Without Perishing: A Practical Handbook for Academic Authors* 29-33.

Methodology

A literature search for a glimmer that someone else felt the same way I do was largely disappointing, except for Fox and Faver's provocative paper[2] and a few cautions by McNenny and Roen[3].

My research consisted of comparing war stories about past coauthoring efforts with colleagues. Fox and Faver show that one can put a scholarly face on almost anything by calling a very similar methodology "semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a nonrandom sample."[4] Based on personal experience--not all of it bitter--some suggestions are listed below.

Clues for Collaboration

1. Remember Ivana and The Donald. Write a pre-collaborative agreement that gives either party the power to say, "This isn't working," and to walk away from the project, taking the children (uh -- data) if justified. Spelling out in advance the conditions under which this may happen may save a lot of grief, but

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[2]Fox & Faver, "Independence and Cooperation in Research: The Motivations and Costs of Collaboration." *Journal of Higher Education*, 55(May/June, 1984):347-359.

[3]McNenny and Roen, "The Case for Collaborative Scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition." *Rhetoric Review* 10(Spring, 1992): 191-230.

[4]Fox & Faver, page 348.

not necessarily. In professional life, going awol causes sticky ethical problems. Given the exigencies of life, your pre-collaborative agreement probably should contain a clause about who owns the data if one party becomes unwilling or unable to continue with the project. A related point is (1a): Be a material girl (or boy). Your pre-collaborative agreement should include some remarks about expenses. The chance to halve expenses as well as duties should not lead you to assume that your collaborator is necessarily operating under your unvoiced expectations any more than did your last blind date. Spell it out. If we share the cost of data-gathering or clerical help but one of us poops out before completing the project, what are the implications? In one unfortunate experience, a collaborator, after the data-gathering stage, took off for the land of the tall corn and was not heard from thereafter. In the absence of a specific agreement, the truant one *was* resentfully named as coauthor, having contributed very little.

2. Have an unambiguous work plan. This is a bit like tacking up chore charts for kids and getting everyone to check off when they have done their bit. A work plan doesn't mean that both authors share the actual writing. As you will readily acknowledge if you've done any professional reading in the last decade, writing skill is not bestowed with an advanced degree.

If this is the case with your partnership, the weaker writer has, it is to be

hoped, skills in statistics, or graphics, or critical thinking, or database manipulation, or research design, or is very creative or *something*. If not, you must questions why you are entering into this partnership.

3. Collaborators should be equally motivated. It will not be a happy collaboration if one party is up for promotion in six months and the other is planning retirement. One pair of my acquaintance had a manuscript conditionally accepted by a prestigious journal, pending revisions. Author A was eager to revise; author B felt that the requested revisions violated the spirit of the research. In this case, Rule 3 was operative when the project began, but had been violated by the time the project was completed, as "A" still sought promotion and "B" had decided to bail out and get another job. Perhaps the lesson here is that if life-altering decisions will be influenced by your having published, take the solitary path until this is no longer the case.

Unlike wine, data does not improve with age. When agreeing to collaborate, brutally assess your own and your collaborator's life for possible distractions. Remember when you were a student, and each term you promised yourself that *this* was going to be the semester that you buckled down and got those papers done early? And how you almost never managed to do it? Life intervenes. (There are earthier ways of expressing this sentiment.) I began a shiny new collaboration one

spring, only to have one of us get married that summer and the other begin work on a Ph.D. By the time the data got massaged into an article, we really should have done a second analysis and called the entire mess a longitudinal study.

4. But the partnership should have more going for it than collective need. Before you accept an offer to coauthor, make sure that the potential partner has something to bring to the alliance. I have had modest success writing for publication (i.e., enough for promotion but not enough to make me famous). This humble track record has induced colleagues who had neither writing agenda nor writing aptitude but who did have a desire for promotion to suggest collaboration. "What did you have in mind?" ask I. "Don't know," says colleague. While I agree that senior librarians have some moral obligation to assist newer colleagues, this should not suggest that junior is entitled to a free ride. Be self-preserving. Unless you enjoy doing most of the work and sharing the credit, do not succumb to blandishments. If you want to help, suggest that you would be interested when your colleague has an idea, however nascent.

5. Quarrel with your collaborator. Burnett shows that substantive conflict in the decision making stage is essential to successful collaboration. By "conflict," Burnett means considering alternatives and voicing explicit disagreements.[5] Fox

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[5] Burnett, "Conflict in the Collaborative Planning of Coauthors: How Sub-

and Faver agree that "vigorously aired partnership differences in perspective can make the ultimate product fresh and creative."[6]

Or they may just make you tired.

At a minimum, conflict will reveal whether you are both writing the same article. Unless you discuss goals in advance, one of you may think you're writing a "how we done it good" report, while the other is compiling a bibliographic essay. Some consider collaboration easier if the project is a descriptive one: I write what I think happened; you write what you think happened; then we blend the drafts into a more rounded perspective than either of us could manage alone. If any level of scientific precision matters, a whole new layer of difficulty can arise. A colleague desiring to conduct a comparative study at sites hundreds of miles apart was thrilled when a volunteer collaborator surfaced at the most distant site. Although he stressed conducting the study !!exactly!! the same way at all sites so data would be comparable, the new partner, never having done field research, found my colleague unnecessarily exacting and fussy and disregarded instructions, thereby jeopardizing comparability of the data. Sigh.

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stantative Conflict, Representation of Task, and Dominance Relate to High-Quality Documents." *Dissertations Abstracts International* 52(October, 1991):1236A.

[6] Fox & Faver, page 353

For conflict to be fruitful rather than just stressful, partners should be equals, more or less. Burnett found that while having quarreled with a writing partner correlated with higher quality writing, a dominant/subordinate relationship did not.[7] Don't write with your boss or with someone who is *very* subordinate to you. Your motivations are *not* going to match. Its also *real* tough to walk away if he or she is a procrastinator or a slave-driver or if you have different ideas about where your project should be going.

6. A really critical reader is worth his or her weight in rhinestones. Find a reader who will not just flatter you, changing a comma here and indicating a redundancy there, but instead will point out where your manuscript sings and where it's off key. This person is a true friend, as many colleagues are not willing to risk hurting your feelings in this manner. Find someone who is. A tough hide is a necessary accessory to the writin' life. Gary Fine remarks that "having others read our writing is dangerous, but life is filled with angst, which, if handled well, may become anxious pleasure."[8]

My most vivid experience with this involved a colleague who was exceed-

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[7] Burnett, page 1236A.

[8] Fine, "The Ten Commandments of Writing." *American Sociologist* 9(Summer, 1988), p. 153.

ingly generous with stunningly critical comments that were, once their sting had abated, found to be very beneficial, resulting in a much improved (and ultimately published) manuscript. I will use this person again, but next time will offer coauthor status in return for editing my manuscript into comprehensibility.

7. *P*ropinquity *P*revents *P*rocrastination. Call it the 3P rule. While E-mail undoubtedly speeds communication for some, it does not provide the sheer animal thrill of walking into someone's office and throttling him or her for falling short on the work plan. Or, alternatively, nothing like teeming with shame when your erstwhile coauthor is in your face demanding the draft you promised last week. Somehow an E-mail message with the same inquiry does not have the same guilt-inducing power. A friend told of sending message after unanswered message to a recalcitrant collaborator who was, admittedly, in the path of one of the natural disasters that came with such frequency last year. Was the collaborator suffering? Or were messages being callously ignored or dumped into the bit-bucket in the sky? Little mysteries like this are unsettling when one is facing a deadline.

8. You never know what someone is really like until you write together. Some partnerships will not work because their work or writing styles are dissonant. What one author considers a light touch, the other considers unprofessional. One person works for precisely 30 minutes every day (right after a breakfast of

tofu and dry whole-wheat toast), the other binge-writes only during lunar eclipses. Benjaminson advises that you work with someone whose habits you know, someone with whom you have worked before, even on a non-writing project.[9] Therefore, I suggest that you consider writing with your significant other. You certainly know his or her habits by now, and professional collaboration adds a certain piquancy to the pillow talk. I have done this successfully and will do it again, although if one judges by Long's study of scholarly productivity in the "hard" sciences, we were remarkably progressive, especially the male half of the team. Long found that while approximately 2% of men coauthored with their spouses, about 10% of women did.[10] (It should be pointed out that Long's methodology is flawed by his assumption that spousal coauthors could be identified by their surnames, which does not apply in the case of most collaborative couples of *my* acquaintance.) Collaborating with the significant other only works when the S.O. contributes a missing skill, the same quality one seeks when collaborating with anyone.

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[9] Benjaminson, page 32.

[10] Long, "Measures of Sex Differences in Scientific Productivity," *Social Forces* 71(September, 1992), page 169.

CONCLUSION

McNenny and Roen write that

> Collaboration is a lot like marriage. In a collaborative project, as in marriage, each member needs to respect the other; each needs to be committed to the project; and each needs to carry his or her share of the load. Some collaborative projects and some marriage fail, but that does not mean that they should be discouraged or disparaged.[11]

For an opposing view, I offer you Brenda White, who feels that, "Ideally, all research workers should be unmarried anyway."[12]

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[11] McNenny and Roen, p. 305.

[12] White, "How to Run Your Research Project." *New Library World* 74(October, 1973), page 216.

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